



We need mass action to fight postal management

The APWU convention in Detroit is occurring at a time of upheaval in the post office. Postal clerks are being shifted around, reassigned, relocated, and often enough forced to quit or retire. Postal workers are frustrated and angry, looking for ways to express that and looking for ways to stop postal management's arbitrary, unproductive and illegal actions. There's a possibility of workers, fed up with bureaucratic procedures, rebelling against management and the union's passivity. APWU activists should assist such rebellions, not stand by passively or even try to suppress them.

The APWU will have union elections soon after the convention, and the union is facing a new labor contract in November. This is not your normal contract. Already management is massively cutting jobs and pushing for an end to Saturday mail delivery. For the new contract management will be demanding really steep concessions. We don't know exactly what they are – wages, benefits, pensions, job security or work rules. But whatever they are, workers need to be warned and need to be mobilized against concessions.

APWU president William Burrus promises, "This will not be a giveback contract." But the mood among workers, who can see the writing on the wall, is apprehensive. Workers feel, "We're screwed, and there's no one to defend us." The union has shown itself worse than weak the last few years. Workers are sick of filing grievances, then waiting for years, as the union's response to every management atrocity.

Facing the coming contract, the union leadership has its head in the sand. Candidates of the Leadership Team (the mainstream, established candidates) like to say they will pursue the traditional goals of "better wages, stability, fairness, and a secure future." Apparently they think this makes us feel good, that everything remains hunky-dory. Their plan for achieving raises is to fiddle around with the postal budget -- raising prices on discount mailers, for example. Trouble is, management is not agreeing with this, and most likely an arbitrator will not agree either.

Rank-and-file clerks are being thrown back onto their own resources and their own organization. To confront the present crisis we need to revive the tradition of mass actions that postal workers used so effectively in the 1970s. We need to give up illusions in the sweet songs of harmony being sung by APWU leaders and face the fact that management is trying to wipe us out.

Back in the 70s rank-and-file activists mobilized workers into militant actions that confronted management despite the impotent union leaders. These actions included wildcats and a national strike. The militants' victories were huge: the government was forced to recognize postal unions, to bargain with them and to grant significant and continuing wage raises. The union won recognition, but credit for this should not go to the union leaders of the day who opposed militant actions. All credit must go to the rank and file and militant activists who pressed for independent action and organization.

Today we are not in a position to launch large-scale job actions. But we can develop mass actions – pickets, rallies, public meetings, etc. -- that generate public sympathy and support. Whatever mass actions develop now will be important, even if they don't stop the concessions drive in its tracks. Actions today can re-establish a tradition of struggle that will be crucial in the coming years as management

continues its attacks.

State of the union

During the ongoing recession, and even before, postal management has been slashing tens of thousands of jobs every year. In the last decade this has resulted in the loss of over 170,000 postal jobs. The majority of these were clerk jobs. At the same time, clerks still working have had their jobs combined and their work multiplied. New machines in automation greatly intensify the workload. Many active and retired clerks have given up on the union and quit. The result of job cutbacks and workers' disgust: **APWU membership is down by over one-third** in the last ten years. The union is losing about 1,000 members every month and is in deep crisis. As union leaders continue to allow management to run over clerks, this crisis will deepen into a full-blown catastrophe – the end of Saturday mail delivery, outright layoffs and wage cuts. It'll be up to the rank and file and their initiative for this to be stopped.

Even now management is making a mockery of the no-layoff clause by assigning clerks to other crafts and moving them to other facilities, sometimes far away. Many clerks in Detroit have been told to move to Pittsburgh, Des Moines, or points far north. Maintenance workers have been sent even further, to the southeast and southwest. They are told to either move or quit. These are people with homes, families, and ties to their local areas. The move often destroys family finances (home mortgages) and breaks up the family. No matter – management orders workers to hit the road or quit. Clerks with over 20 years of experience working inside sorting mail are told to get outside and carry mail as letter carriers. If they can't pass the tests for their new assignment, they're terminated. If they can't drive a car, too bad – they're out. And if they do change crafts, they lose seniority and float in a nebulous state between unions, waiting for possible "retreat rights" to kick in or even reassignment to yet another location. Reportedly, some ex-Detroit workers have even been subjected to racial intimidation in other areas.

Reassignments also affect workers who stay at the same facility. Clerks are told they are excess, their job no longer exists – and then they're "reassigned" to their old job. Same work, same location; the only difference is that now they have no seniority on that job and are not allowed to bid on it. Workers shifting jobs, forced into assignments they're not familiar with – all this creates chaos in the workplace, the loss of workers' security and basic rights, and results in many safety problems. Older workers in unfamiliar, physically demanding jobs such as letter carrier and automation are subject to a variety of injuries. And management already has a plan in place – the "National Reassessment Program" -- to deny injured workers their jobs.

What union leaders say

The Leadership Team's presidential candidate, Cliff Guffey (presently executive VP), says (in the July/August issue of *The American Postal Worker*): "Postal workers are facing our greatest challenges ever. Downsizing has resulted in massive excessing, which is causing unprecedented disruption and hardship for our members. Plant consolidations, the closing of stations and branches, and the elimination of Saturday delivery threaten the existence of the Postal

Service.” All true. But what do we do about it? Guffey explains: “... the future of our union lies in getting rank-and-file members involved... We must mobilize our members to reverse management’s regressive policies... organize our members and our customers to exert pressure on our legislators ... in the halls of Congress and on the streets of America. We will use the media ... We will enlist the involvement of every member.” Sounds good, no?

Another Leadership Team candidate (Greg Bell, presently director of industrial relations and candidate for executive VP), says: “... we can expect management to challenge our no-layoff protection and cost-of-living allowance; to seek greater flexibility on work assignments...” But how do we meet this challenge? He says, “... the active participation of rank-and-file union members and stewards and officers is key to our strength.”

So both Guffey and Bell pay lip service to the need for rank-and-file activism. But what are they doing to actually implement this?

What union leaders actually do

The experience of clerks in Detroit is that APWU leadership actually opposes struggle. When workers at the local membership meeting last March voted to hold a rally right away to protest excessing, relocations and reassignments, the local president spoke against the proposal, voted against it and disavowed affiliation with it. National Legislative Director Myke Reid got on the phone with local union leaders and told them they would have to honor the membership’s vote and hold a rally, but nothing about jobs or the loss of jobs could be mentioned. At the same time President Burrus was lecturing a national conference of local presidents that they should be doing things to protest the threatened cutoff of Saturday mail delivery, but in this campaign nothing else such as relocation and reassignment could be mentioned.

The result was that local union leaders refused to invite other unions to the rally and disavowed supporting it. The rally was held anyway on March 31 and was quite successful, with over 100 postal workers enthusiastically denouncing management. But local union leaders continued their campaign of demobilization, haranguing workers in local meetings about how bad it was to mention jobs, relocation or reassignment in public rallies. This had a bad effect, as these were the issues Detroit clerks were hot about. Following the lead of Burrus and Reid, local leaders lectured workers in membership meetings that “No one cares about your job” and “Labor unions cannot fight on labor issues.” These are big lies, but by repeating them *ad nauseam* the union leadership was able to instill a mood of apprehension among workers, a conviction that no one in the union structure would support their struggle.

After the March 31 rally, local union leaders finally sponsored several informational pickets. But they still downplayed the issue of jobs, and they did not involve the rank and file in decisions about organizing these actions or deciding what issues would be raised. As a result, fewer rank-and-file postal workers came to these rallies, and they petered out. The official APWU “Talking Points on Five-Day Mail Delivery” distributed at these rallies bent over backward to avoid the issue of jobs, and it even pretended that a reduction to five-day delivery would only have a “minimal” effect on clerk jobs, and said nothing about what would happen to letter carriers and mailhandlers. Meanwhile clerk jobs are being slashed *even now*, and five-day delivery would be a disaster for *all* postal workers. It would mean even more job cuts, speedup and relocations.

Workers in Detroit remain interested in mounting struggle against postal management as it undercuts and outright violates the union contract. In the upcoming contract workers will be looking for new, iron-clad rules supporting the no-layoff clause: time and distance limits to relocation, limits on reassignments, seniority rights that transcend craft, the elimination of “stand-by”, protection against new job requirements on jobs workers are forced into, mandatory staffing levels, and prohibitions against plant closings. But how do workers achieve these commonsense limits on management? APWU leaders

have opposed even talking about the issues, much less fighting for them. Workers don’t need to be treated like idiots and told to repeat, “We care about service, not jobs.” We know, and the public knows, that these issues are linked, and we care about both. What we need is a *fight* against management’s attempts to undermine both service and jobs.

The rank and file need to get active

Clerks in Detroit are not the only ones protesting. There have been postal pickets around the country, from California to Pennsylvania, from Florida to Ohio. But though APWU has called a number of pickets and rallies, they have mostly been sporadic and uncoordinated. And the bureaucratic procedures of APWU leaders are directed more at getting their pictures in union publications than in mobilizing the rank and file. Rank-and-file activists need to get busy calling for actions and getting ordinary workers involved, regardless of the attitude of union leaders like Burrus and Reid.

An entire generation has passed since rank-and-file activists launched the struggles of the 1970s. These struggles resulted in government recognition of an industrial union for postal clerks and affiliated trades, ongoing wage gains, COLA and other benefits as well as the no-layoff clause. But these results were not handed to us on a silver platter. It took the time and energy of ordinary postal workers, together with militant activists, to build organization and launch struggles. Today postal management is determined to show us the gains of the 70s can be taken away. To stop them we need to revive the lessons of struggle of those days. The rank and file need to be active, and for that activists need to address issues workers are confronting in their daily work-lives and are angry about. We need to design actions workers can access easily and can influence. We need to encourage workers to help plan rallies and pickets. More lessons will be learned as we go along, but the important thing is to get moving and to get workers involved.

“But what about the auto workers?”, some workers say. Is it possible for postal workers to make a dent in the general onslaught against the working class at a time of high unemployment, when the auto workers and others have been forced to take wage cuts and other concessions?

These considerations show that the situation is serious, but that doesn’t mean impossible. We don’t take a head-in-sand attitude and say everything will be fine, don’t worry. We say things are very serious for workers today, and we need to take action, not only for ourselves but for our friends and relatives who depend on us for support as they languish in the unemployment lines. We cannot afford to lose more post office jobs. And we cannot afford to take wage cuts and other concessions. We need mass actions that will raise slogans such as

***Fight job cuts, forced relocation, and overwork!
Keep six-day mail delivery and community post offices!
No givebacks in the contract!
Mass action is the way to fight management!***

To help prepare for mass actions, concerned workers should get in contact with each other, and form networks among themselves and with *Detroit Workers’ Voice*. Write us today! []

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